

Invest wisely

Town meeting is Saturday, and if you're still confused about the proposed expansion of North Hill Golf Course, you're not alone.

In past years we've spoken out in favor of expanding the town-owned golf course to 18 holes as a way to raise revenue and ease the burden on residential taxpayers, but we won't support it this year. There are simply too many unanswered questions.

Town officials have a dismal record when it comes to running the current nine-hole course. The last two times the lease has gone out to bid, officials bungled the process and it's had to be put out to bid a second time. For years, the lease has been a sweetheart deal that didn't bring the town as much money as it should have. Officials have finally corrected that problem. The new lease, which will be put out to bid a second time later this year, promises to sharply increase golf revenue even without an 18-hole course.

And town officials have likewise bungled the expansion project. It's been on the table for several years. Two studies have been done, but officials forgot to include some important information in the economic feasibility study. That problem, along with ordering the study so late it came in only a week before town meeting two years ago, led them to delay taking the project to voters in 1993. Then last year officials wanted to do another \$100,000 study on a proposed \$3.2 million expansion, but town meeting voters said no.

Now town officials suddenly say they have no doubts about the project and that it can be done for less than half the cost of earlier estimates. Is there any wonder numerous questions about the project are being raised as town meeting draws near? Whether it's concerns about the water supply or environment or questions about the profitability of adding nine holes to the course or the unrealistically low cost of the project or the town's ability to manage a golf course — they all add up to the same thing: far too many important questions haven't been fully answered to invest \$1.3 million of public money in the project. And that cost doesn't include renovating the club house, which isn't accessible to handicapped people.

Unlike a new public library, which will provide vital services to the community for the next quarter century, a bigger golf course provides no important service except the possibility of making a little more money. Library trustees came up with a way to cut the cost of their project in half and hinged the \$3 million of town funding on their raising another \$3.2 million through grants and donations. For residents, that's a wise investment in the future of this town. Nine golf holes and a lot of questions isn't.